

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

THE ROLE OF SCIENTIFIC SOCIETIES—SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

by P. J. STANBURY

For the past year I have been President of our Society which we claim is devoted to science. We are a wealthy Society. You know the plans for constructing Science Centre at a cost of two million dollars. We are a Society whose membership has included most of the important natural scientists of this State. World-renowned visitors have lectured in this room. Yet what benefit has the wealth and talent of the Society brought to most of its members or to the general public of New South Wales?

Attendances at recent meetings have been very poor. Less than 10 per cent of members have attended a monthly meeting in the last year. Can any society continue to function under these conditions?

The Royal Society of New South Wales had trouble with attendance over a century ago. At that time it was called the Philosophical Society of New South Wales. It solved its problems by attaining royal patronage and changing its name.

At that Society's recent annual dinner Sir Roden Cutler, one of its Patrons, said :

"The rapidly increasing fields of scientific study and the proliferation of scientific knowledge in recent years almost makes it an impossible task for [a] society to keep the public informed. Scientific investigations and discoveries in the last 25 to 30 years have both excited public imagination and at the same time occasionally frightened the public. [A] society's task is to bring a balance into people's assessment of the advantages and limitations of scientific progress. You need to encourage research and investigation, and occasionally express a word of warning".

Since I have been Curator of the Macleay Museum at the University of Sydney it has recovered from a period of sad neglect and is now growing and expanding. The Macleay Museum grew, as you probably know, from the collections of Alexander, William S. and Sir William Macleay. Sir William donated the total collection to the University in 1886. I have always felt his presence there strongly. Today the Museum is being used and many thousands of people each year have reason to feel grateful for Sir William's generosity. In my work for the survival and restoration of this Museum I have gained some experience in determining what will raise a body from the dead and give it a new lease on life.

This year the Council of our Society has considered ways and means of enlivening the meetings. The Future Role of the Society Sub-committee has been formed. Soon you will receive a circular asking your views on the relative importance of a number of activities, including the publishing of the *Proceedings*, which is the one thing we believe we do well. We shall be trying out a new style of meeting this year. Your response to these things will determine what we do next year.

However, I am now concerned with the future of scientific societies in the long term. How can Sir Roden Cutler's remarks be brought to fruition? I can think of two possible ways.

First, I believe that a society like ours could employ a public information officer who would have the job of advertising the society's activities and of informing both its members and the public at large of its doings.

At one time no one paid much attention to scientists unless it was to remark on their supposed eccentricity. However, by the 1930's scientists were becoming regarded as people who could solve problems. Today scientists are accepted as a normal part of society. The media on the whole report on the work of a scientist or scientists with no more or less enthusiasm than on the doings of any other individual or group in society. Most often the media pay no attention to scientists at all unless scientists deliberately draw attention to themselves. As a rule scientists are very hesitant to do this. The ones who do are usually most adept at raising not only the interest of the public but also large sums of money to be used on research.

With these considerations in mind I shall list the possible duties of a public information officer for a scientific society. He should inform, advertise and stimulate interest both within and outside the society. He would produce newsletters for the members, which would contain, among other things, discussion of the issues being considered by the society's executive body. He would present accounts of the members' current research in the newsletters. He would be responsible for feeding selected information of significance and interest to the public media for dissemination to a wide audience. He should have the experience and qualifications to maintain a strong working relationship with those who control the media. An information officer must be free to speak independently and should be responsible to the executive body of the society only through the president. He must gain and maintain the confidence of the members of the society. Scientists often need to be persuaded of the significance of their work, and an information officer could assist in this area. The officer should present the president or the executive body as the public image of the whole society, thus providing some tangible link between the public and the members.

An information officer should address as many groups as possible both within and outside the society. He must be an active man, providing liaison among the executive body, the member scientists, the media and individuals and groups of the general public. His job is to dispell inertia, apathy and ignorance. He can do this by employing his knowledge and experience, by using tact, by radiating and rousing enthusiasm and by using for the society's profit the same methods of persuasion employed by advertisers and salesmen in the commercial world. An information officer must use modern methods.

This brings me to my second suggestion for enlarging and enlivening a society's activities. This is the use of radio.

It is hardly likely that a society like ours could acquire substantial regular broadcasting time on the ABC or on commercial radio. However, we could investigate the alternative types of radio which include adult and extension programmes, University of the Air private stations, radio stations with low output which are virtually closed circuit radio, and Frequency Modulation (FM) radio.

If FM radio is introduced into Australia, it is probable that many community group radio stations will spring up. I suggest that the Linnean Society could make good use of an FM group station. We could, for example, broadcast weekly in the evening, giving news of special interest to scientists; details of available grants; job opportunities; information on new equipment; consumer reports on scientific equipment; news and information for members; talks, lectures and courses; advice to conservation groups and other environmental bodies; reports on the best places to see flora, fauna and geological phenomena, and many other activities.

If we found difficulty in compiling enough material for our own weekly programme, we could join together with other societies for the purpose of the broadcast. This idea is in line with the concept of the Science Centre that the Royal and Linnean Societies are striving to establish. The Centre is envisaged as a building in which many scientific societies may have offices and facilities for their mutual benefit.

The initial cost of a radio station is \$75,000. We should consider how our Society can best look to the future and how it can best serve the general public. No longer can scientific societies and scientists keep ostrich-like attitudes. The future of this country depends on the co-operation of all members of its population. How can you, as a scientist, best serve the community?